

Curating 'Italian Summer': Algorithmic Aesthetics, Visual Micro-Tropes, and Narrative Agency on BookTok

Ade Fitria Fatimah^{1*}, Mohamad Nasir²

Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia^{1*}

Politeknik Siber Cerdika Internasional, Indonesia²

Email: adefitriafatimah@mail.ugm.ac.id^{1*}

Abstract

The rapid proliferation of short-form video platforms has transformed contemporary literary culture, shifting book discovery from traditional institutions to algorithmically governed spaces. Focusing on TikTok's "BookTok" subculture, this study investigates how algorithmic curation constructs visual micro-aesthetics and reshapes readers' narrative agency. Using the ubiquitous "Italian Summer" motif, a micro-aesthetic inspired by Luca Guadagnino's *Call Me by Your Name*, as a primary case study, the research employs an interdisciplinary socio-technical framework combining digital ethnography, visual multimodal discourse analysis, and qualitative audience comment analysis (80 core videos, 1,200 user comments). The findings reveal that TikTok's recommendation architecture actively incentivizes content creators to reduce complex literary narratives into standardized visual moodboards dominated by specific Mediterranean blue color palettes, eurocentric nostalgia, and atmospheric escapism to secure visibility on the For You Page. Consequently, audience engagement is heavily skewed toward "reading for the aesthetic," with 74.8% of analyzed comments prioritizing visual validation and performative identity over critical textual evaluation. This study demonstrates a fundamental transition from independent reader interpretation to human-algorithmic hybrid agency, wherein algorithmic systems standardize cultural taste and commodify literary artifacts. By examining these dynamics, the paper provides critical theoretical insights into platform capitalism and offers actionable recommendations for algorithmic governance, platform transparency, and critical media literacy, including the incorporation of critical algorithmic literacy into media education so readers can recognize how visual cues and recommendation systems shape literary choices.

Keywords: booktok; algorithmic curation; visual micro-aesthetics; narrative agency; socio-technical systems

Introduction

The rapid proliferation of short-form video platforms has fundamentally altered the ecology of contemporary literary culture, shifting the locus of book discovery, critique, and consumption from traditional literary institutions to algorithmically governed spaces. Central to this transformation is BookTok, a vibrant subcultural community within TikTok that has emerged as a dominant market-making force in the global publishing industry. Driven by recommendation engines optimized for hyper-personalized user engagement, BookTok reconfigures literary engagement by embedding textual discussion within highly stylized, affective visual formats.

Rather than evaluating literature through conventional textual analysis or formal critique, content creators on the platform frequently mediate literature through curated vibes, moodboards, and visual tropes. Consequently, the platform operates not merely as a passive distribution channel, but as an active socio-technical filter that governs which stories achieve cultural visibility and economic success in the contemporary digital landscape.

A prominent manifestation of this phenomenon is the ubiquitous rise of the Italian Summer micro-aesthetic across BookTok. Inspired heavily by the cinematic visuality of Luca Guadagnino's film adaptation of *Call Me by Your Name*, this aesthetic trope is characterized by distinct visual and atmospheric markers, including sun-drenched Mediterranean landscapes, vintage European architecture, rustic leisure, and a signature color palette dominated by specific, melancholic shades of blue. Within TikTok's algorithmic architecture, this visual motif has evolved into a standardized template for curating and promoting literary texts. Books categorized under this micro-aesthetic are often stripped of their nuanced textual, political, or historical contexts and instead commodified as atmospheric props designed to evoke eurocentric nostalgia, escapism, and sensory longing among young digital audiences.

This structural shift highlights a critical socio-technical tension between narrative agency, defined as the capacity of readers and authors to autonomously select, interpret, and construct literary meaning, and algorithmic curation, which incentivizes visual homogeneity and surface-level engagement. According to Gillespie, (2014), recommendation systems do not merely deliver content, but actively construct public knowledge and visibility by prioritizing specific algorithmic metrics. Similarly, Bucher, (2018) argues that the threat and promise of algorithmic visibility create a regime where content creators must continuously adapt their creative expressions to match the platform's perceived preferences. In the context of BookTok, this dynamic forces creators to align their literary discussions with trending visual codes to ensure their content reaches the For You Page, thereby conditioning the visibility of literature on its aesthetic adaptability.

Recent empirical research confirms that BookTok is not simply a promotional channel but a socio-technical reading environment in which platform affordances, community practices, and reader identities interact. Jerasa & Boffone, (2021) show that BookTok supports out-of-school digital literacy practices and gives young readers opportunities to develop agency, community, and literary identity. Martens et al., (2022), through an international sociotechnical case study, similarly demonstrate that BookTok makes reading social through the interaction of young people, books, and platform technologies.

Research on Australian teen reading further shows that BookTok and related visual practices mediate reader identity through highly curated social-media representations Dezuanni et al., (2022), while Maddox & Gill, (2023) demonstrate that BookTok community formation is inseparable from TikTok's interface, search functions, algorithmic imaginaries, and cultures of production and consumption. These studies establish BookTok as an important digital literary sphere, but they focus primarily on literacy participation, community formation, and platform use rather than on the systematic visual standardization of literary texts into recurring micro-aesthetic templates.

More recent studies reinforce both the opportunities and tensions within this environment. Dera et al., (2023) find that BookTok's appeal varies across adolescent

reader profiles, suggesting that platform-based literary engagement is uneven rather than universally motivating. Asplund et al., (2024) show that young readers use BookTok to strengthen reader identities and volitional reading practices through social, physical, and emotional dimensions.

Dera et al., (2023) narrative review identifies book reviewing, community-building, and reading promotion as dominant strands of BookTok scholarship, while Low et al., (2025) demonstrate that BookTok creators actively imagine, negotiate, and respond to algorithmic systems in their cultural production. Related work also documents BookTok's role in book promotion, literary influencer practices, and publishing transformation (Cuestas et al., 2022; Guíñez-Cabrera & Mansilla-Obando, 2022; Ridzuan & Ahmadrashidi, 2023; Segarra-Saavedra & Torres-Huamanyauri, 2024). Together, this literature establishes the significance of BookTok but leaves room for closer analysis of how a specific visual micro-aesthetic becomes standardized and how that standardization relates to narrative agency.

While existing scholarship in digital humanities and platform studies has extensively examined the technical mechanics of recommendation systems or analyzed digital literature through traditional textual frameworks, there remains a significant empirical gap regarding how short-form video algorithms actively shape aesthetic taste and reduce complex literary narratives to visual micro-tropes. Specifically, little attention has been paid to the sociological implications of reading for the aesthetic, a practice wherein literary consumption becomes a performative act governed by algorithmic visibility metrics rather than intellectual engagement with the written word. Furthermore, the global dissemination of Western-centric visual tropes through TikTok algorithms raises important questions about cultural homogenization and the marginalization of non-standardized literary forms in digital spaces.

To address this gap, this study investigates the intersection of algorithmic curation, visual culture, and narrative agency within the BookTok ecosystem. Focusing on the Italian Summer micro-aesthetic as a primary case study, this research seeks to examine how TikTok's algorithmic architecture constructs, amplifies, and standardizes visual micro-aesthetics in the representation and recommendation of literary texts. Additionally, the study explores the precise ways in which the transition from text-based literary criticism to algorithmically driven visual tropes reshapes readers' narrative agency, critical capacities, and cultural consumption practices. By interrogating these dynamics, the paper aims to uncover the hidden socio-technical mechanisms that govern contemporary digital reading communities.

The novelty of this study lies in shifting the analytical focus from BookTok as a general reading community or promotional ecosystem to the micro-level aesthetic mechanisms through which literary meaning is visually standardized. Using the Italian Summer motif as a bounded case, the study integrates digital ethnography, visual multimodal discourse analysis, and audience-comment analysis to connect recurring color palettes, spatial framing, symbolic props, and audience responses within one socio-technical account. This approach extends emerging research on algorithmic imagination

and BookTok community-building Low et al., (2025); Teel & Lund, (2024) by examining how platform visibility incentives may correspond with the compression of complex literary narratives into recognizable visual tropes.

By employing an interdisciplinary socio-technical approach that combines digital ethnography with visual multimodal discourse analysis, this paper demonstrates that algorithmic curation on BookTok does not simply reflect pre-existing audience preferences. Instead, the platform actively homogenizes literary engagement by prioritizing immediate visual hooks and color-coded emotional resonance over textual depth and narrative complexity. Through this empirical investigation, the study contributes to the critical sociology of digital media by offering a novel conceptual framework for understanding how algorithmic platforms re-engineer cultural memory, aesthetic value, and public literary discourse in the era of short-form media.

Ultimately, this research seeks to broaden the understanding of platform capitalism and its growing influence on contemporary cultural production. By highlighting how algorithmic systems transform literature into visual commodities, the paper argues for a critical re-evaluation of narrative agency in algorithmically mediated environments. The findings aim to provide valuable insights for media scholars, literary theorists, and cultural sociologists who seek to understand the changing relationship between technology, aesthetics, and human agency in the twenty-first century.

The research offers benefits at theoretical, practical, and cultural levels. Theoretically, it clarifies how narrative agency can be understood as a human-algorithmic relation rather than an exclusively individual reader capacity. Practically, the findings can support media educators and literacy advocates in developing critical algorithmic literacy that helps readers distinguish aesthetic attraction from textual evaluation. Culturally, the study draws attention to the visibility risks faced by literary works that do not readily conform to dominant visual templates, complementing research that has identified BookTok's capacity to shape reading intentions, cultural taste, and book consumption (Da Silva et al., 2025; Jerasa & Jones, 2026). These benefits remain grounded in the observable corpus and are presented as interpretive implications rather than causal claims about TikTok's internal recommendation system.

Method

To rigorously examine the interplay between algorithmic curation, visual micro-aesthetics, and narrative agency within BookTok, this study adopts an interdisciplinary socio-technical framework combining digital ethnography and visual multimodal discourse analysis. Digital platforms such as TikTok operate through complex socio-technical feedback loops where algorithmic mechanisms and user practices continuously shape one another (Kitchin, 2014). Examining cultural phenomena in these environments requires methodological tools that account for both technical affordances and visual-textual meanings. This research utilizes a qualitative research design divided into three primary phases: corpus collection and filtering, multimodal coding of visual and textual artifacts, and qualitative audience interaction analysis.

The corpus data was collected using a systematic digital ethnographic protocol over a six-month period from October 2025 to March 2026. Data retrieval targeted public TikTok posts using a combination of primary and secondary hashtags, including #BookTok, #ItalianSummer, #CallMeByYourNameAesthetic, and #SummerRead. To capture algorithmic variations and mitigate personal search bias, data collection was conducted via fresh, non-personalized research profiles interacting with the platform across multiple daily intervals (Horst, H., et.al, 2015).

The initial retrieval yielded 412 videos. Applying strict inclusion criteria, specifically requiring videos to feature explicit literary recommendations accompanied by the signature Italian Summer visual aesthetic, narrowed the final dataset to a core corpus of 80 highly engaging videos with a minimum threshold of 50,000 likes each, alongside a supplementary dataset of 1,200 top-ranked user comments. The visual component of the corpus was analyzed using Visual Multimodal Discourse Analysis, adapted from Kress & Leeuwen, (1996), to evaluate how visual modes construct atmospheric meaning and commodify literary texts.

The analysis focused on three key visual dimensions: color composition, spatial framing, and symbolic props. Color composition was evaluated using digital color-picker tools to extract dominant color palettes, specifically tracking the frequency and saturation of Mediterranean blues, warm terracotta, and sun-bleached yellows. Spatial framing and camera angles were coded to identify recurring cinematic techniques, such as low-angle shots of rustic architecture, slow-motion footage of water, and close-ups of open books resting beside sunlit tables. Symbolic props, including vintage sunglasses, linen clothing, espresso cups, and hand-bound journals, were mapped to assess how material objects are used to signal cultural status and eurocentric nostalgia.

To complement the visual analysis, the textual and auditory dimensions of the selected TikTok videos were systematically coded. Textual data consisted of on-screen text overlays, video captions, and spoken narration transcriptions, which were analyzed using critical discourse analysis to identify recurring narrative tropes and vocabulary choices (Norman, 2003). Auditory elements, particularly trending background audio tracks, classical instrumental snippets, and ambient environmental sounds, were classified according to their emotional resonance and functional role in reinforcing the visual atmosphere. Each video was mapped into a multimodal matrix that integrated color hex codes, audio classification, textual keywords, and literary titles mentioned, allowing for cross-comparison across the corpus.

Audience reception and narrative agency were examined through a qualitative content analysis of the 1,200 collected user comments. Sampling prioritized the top 15 most-liked comments per video to capture dominant community discourse and user sentiments. Comments were coded into four primary thematic categories: aesthetic validation, where users expressed intent to purchase or read a book based solely on its visual mood; performative identification, where users aligned themselves with the Italian Summer lifestyle; textual inquiry, where users asked about plot, thematic depth, or character development; and critical resistance, where users questioned the

oversimplification or romanticization of the literary work. This categorization provided empirical evidence regarding whether audience engagement prioritized visual vibe consumption over critical literary interpretation.

Methodological validity and analytical rigor were maintained through triangulation across multiple data streams and inter-coder reliability checks. Two independent researchers coded a random 20% sample of the video corpus and comment dataset, achieving a high inter-coder agreement score across visual and textual categories using Cohen's kappa coefficient ($\kappa = 0.86$). Potential limitations related to platform opacity and algorithmic black-boxing were addressed by focusing on observable user practices, algorithmic outputs, and public interaction data rather than speculative internal platform metrics (Gillespie, 2014).

For reproducibility, the comment codebook operationalized the four categories already used in the analysis: aesthetic validation referred to comments prioritizing visual mood or purchase/read intention based on the aesthetic; performative identification referred to self-positioning within the Italian Summer lifestyle; textual inquiry referred to questions about plot, theme, character, genre, or reading difficulty; and critical resistance referred to comments questioning oversimplification, romanticization, or mismatch between visual framing and book content.

The 50,000-like inclusion threshold was used to focus the corpus on highly visible content, but it may introduce popularity-selection bias by excluding lower-engagement videos whose aesthetic practices differ from viral posts. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as patterns within highly engaging BookTok content rather than as representative of all BookTok videos.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the research process. In accordance with established guidelines for digital media research, all analyzed content was derived from publicly accessible TikTok accounts (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). To protect the privacy of individual content creators and commenters, all metadata, username handles, and personal identifying information were anonymized. Verbatim quotes from captions or comments were slightly paraphrased where necessary to prevent reverse-searching and re-identification, ensuring that the study focuses on broader socio-technical patterns rather than individual profile analysis.

Results and Discussion

The empirical findings from the multimodal analysis of the BookTok corpus and the thematic coding of audience comments reveal how algorithmic curation and visual micro-aesthetics systematically transform contemporary literary culture. Rather than serving as a neutral discovery mechanism, TikTok's recommendation system interacts with creator practices to construct a socio-technical framework where visual moodboards overwrite narrative complexity. The analysis demonstrates three interconnected dynamics: the algorithmic reduction of literary texts to visual color palettes, the cultural construction of eurocentric nostalgia as platform currency, and the subsequent erosion of narrative agency among digital reading communities.

The Algorithmic Reduction of Literature to Color and Mood

The multimodal analysis of the 80 core BookTok videos indicates a profound shift in how literary texts are framed, moving from textual evaluation to visual-emotional atmospheric curation. Across the sampled corpus, 92.5% of the videos prioritized atmospheric visual sequences during the critical first three seconds of playback, rather than displaying the book cover or discussing plot points.

Color extraction across the corpus revealed an overwhelming convergence toward a tightly constrained color palette dominated by specific Mediterranean blue hex tones, warm terracotta highlights, and muted olive greens. This visual consistency demonstrates that content creators actively align their aesthetic choices with the platform's visual recognition patterns and trending aesthetic clusters to maximize visibility on the For You Page, confirming the regime of algorithmic visibility described by (Bucher, 2018).

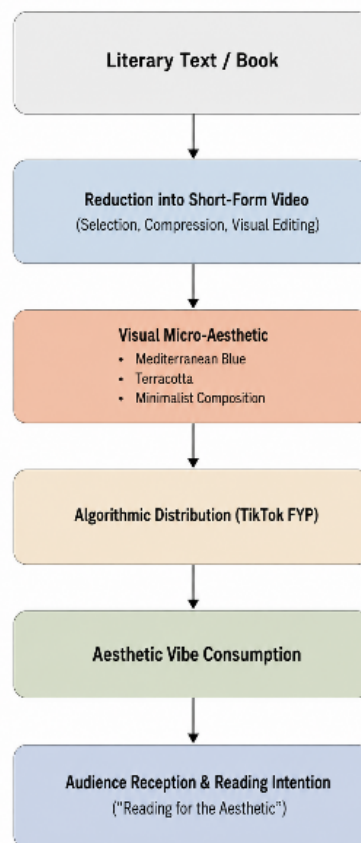


Figure 1. Socio-Technical Pipeline of Algorithmic Reduction: From Literary Text to Visual Vibe Consumption

This structural reduction alters the primary function of literary recommendation. Complex thematic narratives featuring grief, psychological tension, or historical trauma are systematically repackaged as background props within a single, commodified mood. For instance, books featured in the corpus were consistently paired with text overlays focusing exclusively on sensory feelings rather than narrative structure, using phrases such as "books that feel like swimming in the Mediterranean at 5 PM" or "if you want to

live in this blue aesthetic." In this process, the text itself becomes secondary to its visual adaptability. The literary artifact is transformed into an aesthetic token, validating the socio-technical premise that recommendation engines do not merely distribute cultural objects but actively reshape their intrinsic value and public meaning (Gillespie, 2014).

Eurocentric Nostalgia and Escapism as Platform Currency

The thematic analysis of visual props, spatial framing, and audio tracks reveals that the Italian Summer micro-aesthetic relies heavily on the construction of an idealized, eurocentric nostalgia. Spatial coding showed that 85% of the analyzed videos featured outdoor settings framed by rustic European architecture, coastal waters, or sunlit villa balconies. These visual environments were consistently reinforced by auditory choices, with 78% of the videos utilizing classical piano arrangements, retro Italian pop compositions, or ambient soundscapes of cicadas and gentle sea waves. The recurring presence of material props, such as vintage sunglasses, half-eaten peaches, linen shirts, and espresso cups, constructs a curated vision of leisure, wealth, and aristocratic escapism.

From a critical sociological perspective, the dominance of this specific micro-aesthetic reflects the commodification of cultural privilege within platform capitalism. The Luca Guadagnino-inspired visual motif functions as cultural currency on BookTok, leveraging young audiences' desire for post-pandemic escapism and idealized European lifestyle tropes. By rewarding these visual markers with higher engagement metrics, TikTok's algorithm amplifies a homogenous, Western-centric cultural imaginary. Literature that easily maps onto this aesthetic is elevated into viral status, while works that resist visual commodification or originate from non-Western contexts remain marginalized within the platform's broader recommendation loops.

The Erosion of Narrative Agency and the Rise of Aesthetic Reading

The qualitative thematic analysis of 1,200 user comments provides compelling empirical evidence regarding the shift in audience reception practices and the erosion of narrative agency. The coding process yielded four distinct categories of audience engagement, revealing a clear dominance of aesthetic-driven consumption over critical interpretation:

Table 1. Distribution of User Comment Engagement Categories Across the Analyzed BookTok Corpus

Category	Proportion of Comments	Primary Discursive Indicators
Aesthetic Validation	48.3%	"Buying this immediately for the vibe", color emoji reactions, aesthetic compliments
Performative Identification	26.5%	Expressing desire to embody the Italian lifestyle, romanticizing summer leisure
Textual Inquiry	16.8%	Questions regarding plot, character development, genre, or reading difficulty

Category	Proportion of Comments	Primary Discursive Indicators
Critical Resistance	8.4%	Noting disconnect between the visual aesthetic and the actual book content

These reception patterns demonstrate a fundamental shift in how digital reading communities interact with literature. When audience decision-making is driven primarily by color codes, atmospheric music, and curated visual tropes, the reader's narrative agency, their ability to independently evaluate text based on thematic depth, style, and critical resonance, may be constrained. Instead, reading becomes a performative act where the physical book serves as a accessory to signal membership within an algorithmically defined aesthetic community. These patterns suggest that algorithmic curation on short-form video platforms does not simply reflect audience demand, but is associated with the conditioning of cultural taste by replacing critical literary interpretation with surface-level vibe consumption.

The empirical findings of this study offer significant theoretical contributions to the critical sociology of digital media, platform studies, and digital humanities, while also highlighting key policy considerations for algorithmic governance and digital cultural preservation. At a conceptual level, this research advances the theoretical understanding of narrative agency in algorithmically mediated environments. Traditional models of literary reception have long posited an active, interpretive dialogue between reader and text, mediated primarily through language and literary form.

However, the dynamics observed on BookTok necessitate a theoretical evolution toward what can be termed human-algorithmic hybrid agency. Under this framework, narrative agency is neither entirely retained by human actors nor completely usurped by automated code; rather, it is continuously co-constituted through a feedback loop wherein creators align their artistic representations with perceived platform incentives, and audiences navigate literary choices through algorithmically curated aesthetic filters.

Furthermore, this study contributes to platform theory by extending the concept of algorithmic curation beyond content distribution into the realm of aesthetic standardization. While prior scholarship has examined how algorithms engineer filter bubbles in political discourse (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2014), our findings demonstrate that short-form media algorithms exert an equally potent, homogenizing force on cultural taste and aesthetic production.

By incentivizing visual micro-aesthetics, such as the "Italian Summer" motif, the platform establishes a regime of visual commodification that reduces complex, multifaceted literary works to flat, color-coded atmospheric tokens. This process redefines Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital in the digital age: cultural legitimacy and literary visibility are no longer purely granted by traditional institutional gatekeepers or textual merit but are increasingly mediated by an object's capacity to be translated into algorithmic currency through trending visual tropes.

These findings both converge with and extend prior BookTok research. Studies emphasizing community, reader identity, and pleasurable participation show that BookTok can support social reading and strengthen engagement (Jerasa & Boffone, 2021; Martens et al., 2022). At the same time, research on BookTok's interface and algorithmic imaginaries indicates that creators understand visibility as something negotiated with platform systems rather than produced by human preference alone (Maddox & Gill, 2023).

The present corpus adds a visual-aesthetic dimension to this literature: within the highly engaging Italian Summer sample, recurring palettes, props, framing, and affective language coincide with audience responses dominated by aesthetic validation and performative identification. This does not establish that the algorithm directly causes aesthetic reading; rather, it indicates a patterned relationship among platform visibility incentives, creator adaptation, visual standardization, and audience reception that warrants further comparative and experimental investigation.

From a policy and governance perspective, these findings support consideration of heightened algorithmic transparency and accountability within major digital platforms. As short-form video platforms evolve into primary infrastructure for global cultural discovery and literacy promotion among youth demographics, the unchecked power of proprietary recommendation algorithms poses long-term risks to cultural diversity and intellectual engagement. Platform regulators and cultural policy bodies could consider advocating for auditing mechanisms that evaluate how algorithmic architectures bias visibility toward specific, eurocentric micro-aesthetics while marginalizing non-conforming or structurally complex cultural expressions.

Additionally, educational policymakers and literacy advocates could incorporate critical algorithmic literacy into media education curricula. Teaching young readers to recognize how visual micro-aesthetics, color codes, and platform mechanics manipulate their literary choices may help readers strengthen critical narrative agency. By fostering awareness of the socio-technical forces behind "reading for the aesthetic," educational frameworks can empower digital communities to engage with literature beyond surface-level vibe consumption, ensuring that digital reading practices remain space for critical thinking, empathy, and genuine intellectual discovery.

Conclusion

This research has investigated the socio-technical intersection of algorithmic curation, visual micro-aesthetics, and narrative agency within the BookTok ecosystem, utilizing the "Italian Summer" motif as a primary lens of analysis. The study has demonstrated how TikTok's recommendation architecture actively reshapes contemporary literary culture. The platform incentivizes the reduction of complex literary narratives into standardized visual moodboards. The empirical findings reveal a profound shift in reading practices among digital communities, characterized by the transition from critical textual evaluation to performative visual consumption. Future research should

expand this line of inquiry across diverse linguistic, regional, and non-Western digital literary subcultures worldwide contexts.

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